

BEIRUT, I LOVE YOU

BY ZENA EL-KHALIL

Beirut and I... well... it's a sort of a love-hate thing.

She's been in and out of my life for as long as I can remember.

When I was younger, growing up in the wild jungles of Africa, Beirut seemed distant and strange. There were always these words that popped up every time someone mentioned her name.

Words like war.

Conflict.

Death.

It was so much easier to get along with the wilderness and magic of West Africa than my grandparents, whom we called long distance every Sunday night. "Allo..." I would whisper (crackle... crackle... white noise...crackle). My grandmother would scream back, "Zena! Zena, can you hear me? Can you hear me?! Allo!" Mom's eyes would grow big, "say *keyfick Teta*." I was so shy. I couldn't speak a word of Arabic and I didn't like the way Mom kept feeding me sentences. At age 10, I was already caught up in a crisis. I didn't want to ask how my grandmother was doing because I knew she wasn't doing well.

Why lie about war?

Now, several decades later, my Arabic has greatly improved, but I am still struggling with the reality of war. With Beirut. I am still trying to understand what happened to this city, while I was growing up on a different continent.

I attempt dialogue. I listen to people's different versions of the 'conflict'. Understanding our history has become an obsession. Trying to understand the relationship between men and guns has become a passion. Trying to move beyond war – a struggle. It seems it's global now.

Today, we live life at a very fast pace. We fly. We buy. We change. We come and go. But war... war is still present. War – an absolute waste of time and life is still present in our fascinating global society. When I paint, I try to make peace with Beirut. When I sculpt, I attempt forgiveness. Because I understand the burden of humiliation.

In my studio, overlooking the beautiful, but heavily polluted Mediterranean Sea, I understand that I am deeply connected to ironic circumstances. Irony. It is the nature of the land I live in. All of them. War has followed me everywhere I went. Being tear-gassed on the streets of Lagos. In Manhattan, as I watched the two buildings fall. In Beirut, since time began.

Why make art? Why Beirut?

Despite bombs, assassinations, social hypocrisies, corruption in politics, displaced citizens, refugees that sleep five to a bed, chaos and cancer; Beirut will never lie to me. She is totally transparent. She is honest.

About her defects.

And about her beauty.

I make art because I have to. Because it is a deep need. A habit. A compulsion. And in Beirut, everyone has an addiction to something or someone or some pill or some drink or some state of euphoria or depression or love or hate or sickness or health. In the ugliness of war, I have to carve out a small, safe and beautiful space for myself.

Every act we do or word we utter, we are absolutely responsible for. We are absolutely responsible for being alive. I am, and I am grateful for only being, a microscopic fragment in the cosmos of things... the great unbendable universe.

In so many ways, our beliefs create the reality we experience, and it is these personal experiences that offer the ultimate criterion for truth. I believe that truth is beauty in definition; ergo Beirut = Beauty. Every form of creative invention is evidence that a person is spiritually alive. It becomes a valid human experience; a genuine moment, a word, a sound, an act, a visual, an idea- all the process of being alive; all the affirmation of existence. Beirut is real. Beirut is alive.

The deeper I look into myself, the more I find that I am connected to something much greater. And this comforts me... knowing that everything I feel or make is a catalyst in someone else's mind. And the more I let go to experience these beliefs, the closer I become to you. We become one, without being numerical.

In a sense, by painting, sculpting, drawing, writing and even thinking... I am contesting for life. I am contesting for your life. I am contesting for my life.

And it is Beirut that is holding us together.

Zena El-Khalil, born in 1976, has lived in Nigeria, London, New York and currently lives and works in Beirut. She is an installation artist, painter, and curator. During the July 2006 attacks on Lebanon, her blog beirutupdate.blogspot.com received international acclaim. In 2008 El-Khalil completed her first book, a memoir entitled Beirut, I Love You, published by Saqi Books. For more information visit www.ziggydoodle.com